



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

MARRIED WOMEN IN FICTION.

BY M. W. HAZELTINE.

IF THE novel be the modern epic,—and since Fielding said it was, no one, we believe, has seriously challenged the assertion,—it is of considerable importance to define its scope and limitations. Is it to stop upon the threshold of the house of life, or is it to go on and penetrate the most capacious spaces and deepest recesses of the mansion? Is the novel to find a terminus, or should it seek a starting-point, in marriage? Who believes any longer in the stereotype formula, “And so they were wedded and were happy ever afterwards”? These questions have long been answered in one way in France and Italy, and for the most part otherwise among English-speaking peoples. Why should there be this difference? Is there any foundation for it in the fundamental principles of ethics or of art? We believe it would be easy to show deductively that the English novel will perish of inanition if the young unmarried girl is to remain its central figure; and we do not think it should be difficult to prove by induction that the masters of English fiction—past, present, and prospective—have for some time recognized the fact.

I.

We have no quarrel with those who protest against the canon of “art for art,” and who insist upon the exercise of a vigilant censorship, the nice weighing of the moral effect of novels, as of newspapers. We are perfectly willing to accept their point of view. Let us only be sure that we recognize the quintessence of morality, and rightly distinguish what the welfare of the community demands. Is it ignorance or wisdom that we should wish our teachers to impart and to confirm? Shall the eyes be trained to range over the whole field of vision, or shall they be tightly bandaged? or, what is scarcely less delusive, be kept nailed to a thin sector of life’s capacious arc? What should we think of the preacher who should turn his face shyly from the gravest problems of existence and discourse solely of the follies and venial

shortcomings of youth ? What should we value in an epic, a dramatic, or a lyric poet who should concentrate his energies on a theme so shallow and so scant ?

We should say to them : You sin against light ; you are committing treason against knowledge ; you are rejecting the primal data of ethics, as they are expounded in philosophies and vitalized in great religions. By turning the back on truly fecund and invigorative subjects you have abased the pulpit, dwarfed the stage, unstrung the lyre. For what is the fundamental purport alike of the Buddhist precepts, the Platonic dialectic, and the Christian gospels ? That triumph implies struggle ; self conquest, trial ; that without exposure and experience there can be no steadfast purity ; that in the absence of temptation real virtue is unthinkable. Where innocence is nine parts ignorance, can it be denied that but a tithe of it can challenge a clear-eyed admiration ? *On n'est pas bon quand on est bête.* If it be true that only in the alembic of full knowledge and poignant suffering can be distilled the beauty and nobility of character, why should we permit a novelist to put us off with meaner chemistry ? If it is through example and through sympathy that our judgments must be enlightened and our passions purged,—and this, according to Aristotle, was the aim of tragedy,—why shall not the moralist exact that the novel, like the sermon or the epic, shall discard trivialities and gird itself to the discharge of the more elevated function ?

Once concede, however, that the novel from the didactic viewpoint should deal with the most spacious and most fruitful tract of life, with the deepest problems of man's destiny, and it becomes patent that unmarried girls are disqualified for heroines, and that the married woman only can perform the central rôle. This is so plain that to the lips of many a woman in the flower of her beauty, experience, and intellect, as she marks a maiden of eighteen trip lightly through the foreground of the conventional story, must rise the wistful words of Guenevere :

“ Oh, closed about with narrowing nunnery walls,
What canst thou know of the world, and all its lights
And shadows, all the wealth and all the woe ? ”

II.

So far as the artist is concerned, he has never needed any counsel from the social philosopher touching his duty in the pre-

mises. He has always known where his true field lay, though he has not always been allowed by current preconception to explore it. It is quite needless to point out that the French novelist has never encountered conventional restrictions, but has been left at liberty to study human nature in all its aspects. To pause to demonstrate this would be, indeed, to preach to the converted. It may be well, however, to remark, because it is sometimes overlooked, that, if the married woman dominates French fiction, this is from a deliberate conviction that the realm belongs to her, and not from any incapacity on the author's part to delineate the winning, but scarcely enthralling, simplicity of maidenhood. George Sand, in the third and tranquil stage of her creative activity, could produce a series of inimitable pastorals and idyls ; and Balzac could pass from the study of a face as haunting and elusive as that of "*La Femme de Trente Ans*," or of personalities so complex as those of *Mme. de Langeais*, *Mme. de Sérizy*, and *Diane de Maufrigneuse* to the faithful portrayal of the untroubled, artless features of "*Eugénie Grandet*."

Octave Feuillet also showed a power of depicting with nice appreciation the young unmarried girl, and it was simply for artistic reasons that he touched the theme but seldom, and then assigned to it a smaller canvas than that which he allotted to his woman of the world. It was by those stories that began instead of ending with a wedding, by, for instance, "*La Petite Comtesse*" and "*Camors*," that Feuillet desired to be remembered. Tolstoi, also, can draw virgin innocence with extraordinary softness and tenderness of touch ; yet it is rather on a face that speaks of struggle and of anguish that his camera is focussed in "*Anna Karénina*," by far the greatest of his works. It is as if the Russian had proclaimed in that novel what in old age he was to disavow, but which no lapse of years or loss of sight could interdict Milton from asserting in the greatest of epics, that it was not possible for Adam to love Eve truly until she had eaten of the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, and that, once awakened to that passion, he could bear with resignation even banishment from Eden.

The English novel has had a curious history. It had a double origin in the Tartuffism of Richardson and the truth-telling of Fielding ; or, as some might prefer to say, the idealism of "*Pamela*" and the realism of "*Tom Jones*." Owing to a con-

flux of reasons which it might take long to define, but which for the most part have their roots in the Anglo-Saxon character, Richardson conquered, and until quite recently it seemed that his conquest was unshakable. The two streams of artistic purpose soon ceased to run separate; the one speedily submerged and, to all appearances, annihilated the other. That did not happen to Fielding's conception of the novel which is fabled to have befallen Arethusa, who could send her own shaft of fresh lymph unmingled and inviolate through the waves of the salt sea. Extinction, not effacement, seemed the doom of the English realist. "No man," cried Thackeray, with a quick gesture of impatience and the ring of anger in his voice, "—no Englishman since Fielding has dared to depict life as it is."

It was natural that Thackeray should chafe and smart under the gyves, for he was far too true an artist to do what smaller men have often had recourse to—seek to evade too stifling and dwarfing conditions by bestowing upon maidenhood ideas and emotions which, as a rule, it cannot know. On the contrary, having to draw a carefully brought-up young girl, he made her what every man who has had a daughter, or a sister, knows her in truth to be; he drew Amelia Sedley. Clever women scoff at poor Amelia, and tax Thackeray with a covert insult in making a child the heroine of a resplendent novel. Their indignation, however, is directed at the wrong object. Thackeray took the English novel as the public and the publishers had cramped it, and made the best of it. He could not be expected in his poverty, with a lot of weaker creatures dependent on him, to attempt a literary revolution. But he never pretended that Amelia was a type of womanhood. He averred simply that she was a type of guileless, unruffled virginity; and in saying that he told the truth.

Other English novelists have shown a far less sensitive and unswerving literary conscience. We refer not merely to the feeble hands, but to some of the greatest masters. They have cheated the public, which they dared not confront. They have striven to slip out of the fetters, which they dared not boldly rend asunder. Scott himself, aye, and George Eliot, have been culprits in this kind. They have over and over again produced a full-grown woman on their canvas, but, to lull the reader's prejudice, they have labelled her "young girl." False art, involving fatal weak-

ness, in spite of its strange seductiveness ! The most enthralling figures in Scott's gallery are at best adorable monstrosities ; they could not exist in nature. Look, for instance, at the three women who approach most closely the modern conception of a lady, and who, at the same time, are endowed with peculiar vigor and puissance. We refer, of course, to Flora Mac Ivor, Diana Vernon, and that lovely daughter of sorrow in "Redgauntlet." Who but the most credulous of readers believes that these women were really of the age which their creator has chosen to ascribe to them ? He says they were twenty. We deny it. We say they were thirty at the least. We demand the production of the parish register, or, failing that most cogent testimony, a sight of the family Bible. We must have evidence more relevant and more conclusive than a dictum which defies verisimilitude.

What is true of those antedated heroines is also true of Romola. She is far too deeply versed in life's philosophy for the years her author has assigned to her. It is plain that she had really lived as long and had seen as much as Dante's Beatrice or Petrarch's Laura, both of whom, it may behoove us to remember, were married. It is noteworthy, however, that George Eliot was alive to the mendacity, the viciousness of her art in this particular. She strove to guard against a repetition of the fault. It is remarkable in "Middlemarch" how little she suffers us to see of the depths of Dorothea's nature till she is mismated with Casaubon. In "Daniel Deronda" the novelist makes even a more deliberate and bolder advance, for Gwendolen is but an outline up to the hour when marriage brings her face to face with the grim, and in her case hideous, realities of life. Had she lived to write another novel, we doubt not that the genius of George Eliot would have burst the bonds with which a century of usage, prescription, and prejudice had tied and choked the English novelist. But the artistic revolution which she foresaw and powerfully furthered is on the eve of full accomplishment. It is in the air and on the page. The English novel is about to enter upon its inheritance. As we write, the latest story of George Meredith, "One of Our Conquerors," is lighting up the sheets of *The Fortnightly*. It foreshadows the advent of an era. In this novel it is not the maiden, fluttering inquisitive, expectant, at life's half-open door, but the woman who has lived and suffered, that starts forth beneath the strongest strokes of the vivifying

brush. It is not the daughter, but the mother, *filia pulchra mater pulchrior*, that rivets eyes and chains the heart.

III.

We suppose that in England the new novels which shall deal more frankly and fruitfully with life, will continue to be mainly penned by men. There will not for many generations be any lack in that country of men not only well born and well nurtured, but also well educated, cultured in a large and elevated sense, and possessed often of a real, as well as surface, refinement. Incessantly recruited will be the sad corps of the ineligible, clerks in the higher government offices, briefless barristers, that know society, yet are perfectly alive to the conditions on which society accepts them. They understand the habits and conventions; they are masters of the shorthand, the signals, the shibboleths of what they who know it call distinctively the "world." They are quiveringly sensitive to the half-tints and semi-tones that make up the exquisite product of a high civilization whom men that most economize the word are willing to pronounce a lady, and who is marked off by a thousand complex and subtle variations from the common type of humbler, hardier, less haunting, femininity. Of such men there will be so many that a few can always be relied upon to evince unusual talent; and these, it seems clear, will unite most of the qualifications needed for the production of a veracious, interpretative, artistic novel. They will, in other words, be fitted in all particulars, save one, to play the acolyte when the married woman finally shall take full possession of prose fiction. There is but a single point of view—the moral—from which they may fall short.

We do not think a Saxon hand would ever dabble in the foul corruption which seems to be the native element of certain Parisians, who try to veil their degradation under *fin-de-siècle* euphuisms. No Englishman will ever herd with the bestial drove that wallows in sloughs and pools that even Zola loathed while he inspected them. Such creatures reach only their own species. Their venom cannot taint the tissues of beings of a higher type. But there may be found in London society men who would do the fell work which such inimitable masters of seductive speech as Gautier and Maupassant have done in their most evil hours. We cannot shut our eyes to the fact that the worst novel written in English in this

century was published by Mr. W. H. Mallock, an unquestionable adept in the graces and suggestiveness of style. The crime which such men commit is the suppression of the iron law embedded in the human heart long before it took vindictive shape in the codes of society—the law that imposes on wrong-doing woe and punishment, even in this life. Such men not only paint temptation, which is lawful and may be helpful, but they show it succumbed to with defiance and impunity. They portray the evil-doer, but omit to delineate the scourge. They make vice doubly infectious, not only by dissembling its deformity, but by hiding its doom. That is why their dainty, deadly compositions,

“Like to a new disease, unknown to men,
Creep, no precaution used, among the crowd.”

IV.

It is a deeply interesting and admirable fact that the perpetration of such disintegrating and intolerable offences seems to be impossible for women. Even by the glowing novels of George Sand no man and no woman was ever corrupted. If we had time to scrutinize this remarkable phenomenon from physiological and psychological view-points, we could probably trace it to the instinct of modesty and purity which nature, contemplating the welfare of the species only, has ineradicably planted in the conservative sex. However that may be, the fact remains, and it offers a good augury for the cleanness, wholesomeness, and sanity of American prose fiction when it shall undertake that larger and profounder treatment of life which is undoubtedly impending. For we take for granted that in this country, as in England, the novel, the typical prose epic, will deal with society in a strictly conventional meaning of the term. There alone are to be found romantic, poetic, enchanting human beings. There alone is there sufficient leisure for the evolution of exquisite tastes, of evanescent and ærial, yet captivating, impulses, of feelings not the less profound and overmastering because they have been clarified and thrice distilled. No wonder that one conscious of penetrating insight and of the right artist's touch should be wooed to the study of elusive themes like these.

We would not, indeed, question for a moment that the primal passions, the joys and woes inseparable from the troubled lot of

man, challenge recognition and portrayal in every social stratum, up and down the whole gamut of existence, wherever man must work and woman weep. We are aware that goodness knows no longitude, and that among the very poor there is no lack of noble lives to honor and to chronicle. Men were told in India long centuries before the Sermon on the Mount that the needy and the struggling shall inherit the kingdom. To which the painter and the poet have in all ages answered, "Aye, the poor are the salt of the earth, yet in salt there is but little delicacy and variety of flavor." In what at every epoch shall pass for society the artist will inevitably seek and find metal more attractive.

But who, then, in America is to write the novel of society? The men who in this country write for a subsistence—and they seem to be the only men who can write well—have no time, even if they wished, to study it. As for the men who see most of it, we have not the slightest desire to undervalue them. They are able, apparently, to accomplish many things, from hunting elephants to administering railways. But, somehow, they do not write novels. It may be that they scarcely appreciate their opportunities. Whatever may be the cause of this unexpected phenomenon, the inference is that, if the women of American society are to be worthily portrayed at all, they will have to do it themselves. There is only advantage to be looked for on the part of art and of morality if they shall essay the task. We shall have novels more incisive and heart-searching than they have in England, and at the same time more healthful and more beautiful, when to the self-watchfulness of feminine training and a woman's instinctive horror of grossness and deformity shall be joined a talent adequate to the technically-skilful and vigorous fulfilment of the aim. Then we shall have a realism, indeed—not otherwise could one elicit the philosophy latent in example. But it will be the realism of the changeful face of earth, bathed with a wistful, soft, and tearful atmosphere, over which the stars are shining.

V.

It is satisfactory to know that the forecast of the uses to which feminine insight and feminine felicity of touch may put the novel, considered as a transcript and interpreter of American society, is no longer a mere dream. The fulfilment of the proph-

ecy has already begun. We have not solely, but particularly, in mind a series of novels—"A Diplomat's Diary," "A Successful Man," and "Mlle. Reséda"—which have recently appeared, and which from the outset have commanded and deserved unusual attention. The writer—Julien Gordon—is now generally understood to be a woman, and, indeed, from the outset the internal evidence of the author's sex was pervasive and conclusive. A glance at some of these naïve, unconscious indications will lead us naturally to consider the artistic and ethical quality of these striking compositions. We say, then, that the texture, color, and, above all, spirit of these stories bear witness not only to the play of a woman's hand, but to touches of a femininity exceptionally refined and delicate. For these, among many reasons: In the first and lowest place, the references to women's clothes are such as never are encountered in a masculine novel. They are not frequent, and they are casual, but they are pointed. We are not competent to affirm their exactitude, but we can testify to their verisimilitude. Whatever be, for instance, the accuracy of an allusion to a certain type of corset, we are at least qualified to say that of its profound gravity a man would be incapable. That is why men are so apt to fail when they try to depict a lady as distinguished from the elemental woman. They cannot bring themselves to recognize the superlative, the solemn, importance of clothes. They cannot be made to see that what they mistake for a dressing-room a lady knows to be an arsenal, and that to her unerring eye her garb is as supreme and vital as was his armor to the warrior or canvas to a sailing ship.

Then there are certain confidential chats between married women—there is one in the "Successful Man," and another in "Mlle. Reséda." Now, had Thackeray transcribed these, though he would have done it with an affectation of demureness, we should have seen incessantly the face of that sly satyr peeping through the leaves. Even George Meredith, who really is on his knees to women, and always sets them above men, could not, we think, have elided from these earnest feminine discourses a note of chastened irony. But in Julien Gordon's books the women always take themselves seriously. They are perfectly justified in doing so. They are, in fact, the only members of the human race that nature troubles herself to take seriously, or concerns herself much about.

There is another interesting and significant accent—it does not recur often enough to be termed a feature—of these stories. Once in a great while one comes on a bit of description which, if detached from the context, divorced from the controlling purpose and final outcome of the tale, and held up to prejudiced or perverting inspection, might bear the epithet of fervid. Upon us, however, such inadvertent openness of speech makes an impression analogous to that produced by the embarrassing questions of a guileless child. For who does not know with what wariness the slightest exposure of ardor in his style would be repressed by an accomplished man of the world, like Maupassant or like Mallock, who should deliberately address himself to the production of a harmful book. Experience would have taught him precisely what precautions hypocrisy prescribes. He would keep his eye unswervingly on the malign end in view, and he would never let his diction utter the faintest note of warning. While George Sand was preaching by example, as well as precept, doctrines entirely subversive of the social structure, her style was as cool and colorless as the current of a mountain brook. When one considers these things, and then notices in Julien Gordon the occasional heedlessness of a mind that thinks no evil, one can scarcely help exclaiming with peculiar energy, “*Honi soit qui mal y pense!*”

The animating and abiding influence of these stories is what we said above it would be should the coming novels be written by ladies, in the definite and narrow meaning of the word. We envy no man and no woman who does not feel that the influence of the books which we have named proceeds from a sound heart and makes for goodness. Of the three tales thus far published by Julien Gordon, two are dramas and one is a tragedy, and in each of them the author instinctively conforms to Aristotle's dictum. By the spectacle of suffering inexorably dogging the heels of divagation the passions are purged and not inflamed, and the conscience is invigorated instead of being narcotized. The first tale, “A Diplomat's Diary,” records the triumph of a sense of duty almost too acutely vibratory over a strong and honest love. There really was no reason which most men would consider adequate why the heroine, a young widow, should not have married the man whom she loved; indeed, had she consulted Goethe, he would have

ordered her to do so. But who shall say that this earth would not be better than it is if there were more examples of unwavering fidelity to a word once plighted, and of infinite compassion for the heart-break which would follow a fiancée's perfidy!

In the second story, "A Successful Man," retribution seems at first sight to be administered by a hand less unerring and implacable. The plaything of an hour's caprice of a married woman seems in due time to be felled as ruthlessly as an ox in the shambles. On the other hand, the curtain is rung down before she who has wrought the mischief learns the dread end of a flirtation begun to give some purpose and direction to the listless drifting of a heart unoccupied. Upon second thought, however, one perceives that one has no right to infer from the author's abrupt reticence the absence of a self-reproachful agony and of a life-long contrition on the part of the heroine. As regards, indeed, this aspect of the treatment, this story perhaps should be regarded as an unconscious counterpart of De Musset's tragic idyl, "*On ne badine pas avec l'amour.*" In the one case as in the other the materials of sorrow and repentance have been heaped before the eye of the onlooker; the pyre, so to speak, is ready; and it is superfluous to paint the inevitable suffering. It will be remembered, also, that he who depicted the sacrifice of Iphigenia had exhausted his capacity of delineating grief on the faces of the bystanders, and, when he came to Agamemnon, drew him with countenance averted.

In "Mlle. Reséda" the indulgence of a vagrant impulse bears with it its own ample and relentless chastisement. A man would have been sorely tempted to give a less wholesome and exemplary turn to this pathetic story. We could point to no more cogent proof of the fundamental uprightness distinctive of this author than the humiliation and the misery which the heroine of this tale undergoes in requital of a single failure to curb an excited fancy. Truly, in the pages of Julien Gordon the way of the transgressor even in thought is hard. Of transgression in act there is no vestige.

One dwells upon the ethical tendency of these stories, both because it exemplifies the effect to be expected from a lady's treatment of the novel, and because the intellectual gifts of this particular author would make her a powerful auxiliary in whatever camp she entered. There are few weapons in the literary armory

of which she is not mistress. It is a mind richly furnished, as well as instinct with rare vigor, which we encounter in Julien Gordon's pages. Yet there is not a trace of pedantry, affectation, or display of knowledge. We rather guess than see the scope and the solidity of the author's equipment. Only now and then, in a phrase, a suggestion, a reminiscence, do we get glimpses of the garnered and winnowed residuum of long study and close thought.

In a word, Julien Gordon writes like a lady, and not like a woman of learning. But while the volume and variety of her knowledge are veiled from us, we are continually impressed with her breadth of view and her nicety of judgment, and we are sometimes startled by the depth of her intuitions. With these substantial aptitudes for the grave function of the novelist go extraordinary lightness of touch and fluidity of style. Not Goldsmith himself ever produced more completely the effect of unpremeditation—of writing, in other words, as children talk and the birds sing. We should add that this author shows a truly delightful instinct for the historical significance, the color and the melody of words. No expert would venture to recast one of her sentences lest a subtle aroma should escape. On the whole, if it would be hasty to ascribe to her first compositions the steady radiance of genius, we must concede that the flashes of it are frequent and unmistakable.

It is, however, only in the style that one perceives a delightful absence of premeditation. It is only the form, the garb, of the idea which is donned with a swift, careless, wild, unconscious grace. Such easy writing masks hard thinking. If we look beneath the dainty surface at the inner substance of these stories, we discern tokens of patient, sustained, strenuous thought. What may be termed the composition of this writer's pictures is plainly the outcome of anxious study and fruitful concentration. Their plan for the most part is admirable. What one expects to find in their construction is traces of the novice, of the untrained 'prentice-hand. What, in fact, we encounter is the eye and the touch of the master workman.

If the stories hitherto brought out by Julien Gordon may be accepted as pledges of even riper and more helpful work to come, we have reason to congratulate ourselves that in this country, at all events, the married woman is to be the author as well as the subject of prose fiction.

MAYO WILLIAMSON HAZELTINE.